

# Hoping for What We Have

[Isaiah 64:1-9]

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down..."

K Karpen, Sunday, November 27, 2005

First Sunday of Advent

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"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Isaiah 64:1

Happy New Year! Today marks the start of the Christian year. One day a few years back a woman came up to me after Rosh Hashanah services at B'nai Jeshurun. She wished me l'shanah tovah, a happy new year and told me she was glad to see me at BJ. Then she said, "And my husband and I observe the Christian New Year, too!" For an eighth of a second I was taken aback. Did she really mean that in her Jewish home they made a wreath and lit a candle on the first Sunday of Advent? But no; what she meant, of course, was that she and her husband drink a lot and eat bad h'orderves every December 31<sup>st</sup>.

Advent, the start of the Christian year, has a bit of an image problem, doesn't it? People—Christians and Jews—barely know it exists, don't know what it is, don't know what it's for. What a shame. Advent is a time whose spiritual richness is only rivaled by that other great season of renewal, penitence, meditation, and self-examination, Lent.

So, what is Advent, and why should we care? Advent is an old holiday, probably older than Christmas itself. In ancient Gaul it was a time of deep repentance and renewal, and involved fasting 3 days a week beginning in early November. In Rome it was a shorter, happier time of festive anticipation. By the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, Advent had become a four-week fast from food, feasting, games, sex & marriage: a time to focus on nothing but God, free of all the distractions of life.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Christians observe the season of Advent by shopping. Now, shopping can also be a spiritual discipline. A time of renewal and penitence. For me personally, MACY's in December is a potent reminder of the anguish of hell we liberal Christians have otherwise given up on. I personally prefer to save the discipline of shopping until the end of the Advent season when the nearness of Christmas brings an urgency and potency to the ritual. I like to shop online; on long, long, long lines, and as I do, I pray for those I am purchasing gifts for. It's the only thing that keeps me on those long, long, long lines.

Advent means "coming," adventus, in Latin. Like many old Christian traditions it was probably created for in the time of Emperor Constantine in an effort to bolster saggy Roman economy. And for how many, in our day, is the coming of Advent noticed primarily in the change of the kind of commercials floating across the screen?

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Adventus. Coming. It marks the waiting, the longing, the yearning for the coming of Christ. And it's really focused on Christ's coming again, as you can see from today's Gospel reading: "The sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."

Jesus, here in Mark, describes a time not of light, but of profound darkness. Deep darkness. And only when the darkness is deep enough, through the darkening of the sun, the disappearance of the moon, the dropping of the stars, only when the darkness is dark enough, will we be able to see the coming of the son of Man.

Most of the time you and I are surrounded by light. In the ancient world, though, a time with no sunlight, no moonlight, no starlight would be a dark time. A time when the world itself would become unseeable, invisible, even unknowable. And yet that is when "They will see the son of man coming in clouds..."

You and I live in a different time. A time when light is really ubiquitous, a time when darkness is rare and hard to come by. A time when we rarely notice and can't use, the light of the stars, and the moon—that great teller of time, setter of seasons, creator of calendars—is just an interesting bit of scenery.

For the ancients, when sun, moon, and stars disappeared, light stopped. When sun, moon, and stars stopped, time itself stopped. But our world is different. Our world is full of light. Artificial light: tungsten, neon, fluorescent, lasers, halogen, infrared, ultraviolet. We live in a world of blue-light specials, red-light districts, black-light posters. We use light to see, but also for security, out of fear. We use light to heal, in laser surgery, but we also use it to torture prisoners, leaving light on for 23-hour-periods.

We have a lot of light, but ours is not necessarily an illumined time. We have a lot of light, but ours is not a culture of enlightenment. We have a lot of light, but we still long for something to dispel the darkness. We live in the light—and we long for the light.

The other day, Harry, our four-year-old, was struggling to understand Advent & why it should be seen as a good thing that Christmas does not come the day after Thanksgiving—why it's worth the wait. He asked us, "If Jesus was already born at Christmas, what are we waiting for?" Charlene replied thoughtfully, "Ask Papa." And

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I babbled some answer. But the right answer is, "That's a very good question." What are we waiting for?

We're waiting for a Christ who's already here. We're waiting for a God whose presence sometimes feels like absence and whose absence sometimes feels like presence. Were they teaching theology in pre-K, Harry would be struggling with what Jurgen Moltman calls the imminent transcendence of God. The here and the absent God. The near and the far-away God. The one we always long for. Advent is the time when we all, whatever the strength of our faith or the lack of it, allow ourselves the luxury of honesty as we long for the God who comes.

So, if shopping is your Advent ritual, fine. But use your moments at Macy's, your sojourn at Saks, to reflect a little on the spiritual emptiness we try to fill in our material culture. If the TV just won't turn off, fine. But as you watch CNN or Desperate Housewives, reflect on the nature of our conflict and why war will continue as long as we continue to fail to realize our deepest conflict is with ourselves.

Feel the frustration & emptiness & loneliness of the season, because in that frustration & loneliness lives the hope of the world. It is the empty longing for God that Isaiah expresses so powerfully. "O, that you would rip open the heavens and come down."

Come, fill our emptiness. Come, make things right. Come, show us what to do and how to live.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus because the longer we long, the stronger we yearn.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, because you can fill all the endless expectation of the world.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, because we can't stop hoping, despite the dimness of the present moment.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, because we've forgotten how to hope.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, because you are our hope.

Come, because in your love is some hope for a loveless world.

